

(Talk given on a British Broadcasting Company (BBC) program. He also lectured on the Children of God at Oxford and is still writing and lecturing on them from his personal research on a grant from the Social Science Research Council.--Editor.)

1. THE CHILDREN OF GOD HAVE BEEN A SOURCE OF CONTROVERSY SINCE THEY FIRST APPEARED in Huntington Beach, California eight years ago. Founded by a fundamentalist evangelical preacher, they sought converts among the hippies and drop-outs of West Coast America.

2. INSISTING THAT ONLY A LIFE OF COMPLETE COMMITMENT WOULD FULFIL CHRIST'S COMMAND TO FORSAKE ALL AND FOLLOW Him, converts were required to give up all they owned to the sect, to abandon job or college, live in community, and work full-time in spreading God's Word as interpreted by their founder.

3. IN A COUPLE OF YEARS THEIR FOUNDER, NOW CALLED MOSES DAVID, HAD BECOME RECOGNISED BY HIS FOLLOWERS AS GOD'S PROPHET of the end-time, since they believe that the end of this present dispensation is close at hand, and Christ will return in 1993.

4. THEIR AGGRESSIVE STYLE OF EVANGELISM DIRECTED ALMOST ENTIRELY AT THE YOUNG, their hostility to the churches, educational institutions and values of modern society, and their unorthodox style of life soon led them to become prominent in the news media.

5. PARENTS CLAIMED THAT THEIR CHILDREN--USUALLY, HOWEVER, OF LEGALLY MATURE AGE--HAD BEEN "KIDNAPPED" and spiritually or psychologically "brainwashed" by the group. And in a report published late in 1974 an Assistant Attorney General of the State of New York, on the basis of what seems to an impartial observer to be rather shaky evidence, added to these charges allegations of fraud, sex-

ual indecency, and systematic evasion of the law.

6. NEWSPAPER AND MAGAZINE REPORTS HAVE ELABORATED THESE THEMES, often rather irresponsibly sensationalising the Children of God in the interests of sales rather than exploring the truth about this youthful millennialist movement.

7. THE CHILDREN OF GOD UNDOUBTEDLY HAVE MANY FEATURES WHICH MAKE THEM GOOD NEWS COPY. They are a youthful movement whose members are mostly between 18 and 25, having developed out of the youth counter-culture and the Jesus People of the late 1960's.

8. THEY EXPECT THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SITUATION TO WORSEN RAPIDLY in the coming decade, leading to the collapse of the cities and of America, the rise of the Anti-Christ, and finally Christ's Return in the 1990's.

9. THEY LIVE IN COMMUNAL GROUPS SEPARATED FROM THE WORLD. They do not work at everyday jobs, but rather devote themselves to full-time evangelism and literature distribution.

10. THEY CONTRIBUTE ALL THEY POSSESS TO THE COMMON FUND when they join, trusting in the Lord to provide for their needs as they seek to spread their message throughout the world before Jesus comes. And in this endeavour they have been remarkably successful.

11. FROM A SMALL HANDFUL IN 1968, THEY HAVE GROWN TO BETWEEN 5,000 - 6,000 MEMBERS scattered in over 600 communes or "Colonies" as they call them, throughout most of the Western World, Australasia, South America, parts of Asia and of Africa.

12. THE CHILDREN OF GOD ARE PROBABLY THE MOST ORGANISED AND DISCIPLINED GROUP THAT REMAINS from the very diverse mixture of youth-culture and religious fundamentalism that made up the Jesus People. While other groups split and drifted

apart, converting many at the outset but usually losing them again soon after, the Children of God have grown from strength to strength.

13. THEY STILL REMAIN FAIRLY SMALL in comparison with the major denominations, but the Children of God don't aim to bring vast numbers into the full rigours of their way of life.

14. THEY REALISE THAT ONLY A FEW ARE PREPARED TO TOTALLY COMMIT THEMSELVES to a life of constant movement, witnessing and distributing literature on the streets. Rather they see themselves as a small commando group trying in what they believe to be the last days, to awaken the world to the need to return to God.

15. IF YOU ARE OVER 25 YOU ARE ONLY LIKELY TO HAVE COME ACROSS THE DISCIPLES OF THIS GROUP IN THE STREETS of major cities offering for a donation the writings of Moses David. Literature distribution for a donation is the group's main source of income as well as their major means of getting out God's message. In a large city a member is expected to distribute at least 1,000 pieces of literature a month, and more usually about 2,500 pieces, in the form of small leaflets.

16. THEIR LAFLETS KNOWN AS "MO LETTERS" COVER AN ENORMOUS RANGE OF TOPICS from current world events and Bible prophecy to the more contentious letters Moses David has written on sexual matters.

17. IT IS PARTICULARLY HIS OPEN AND LIBERAL STYLE OF WRITING ON SEXUAL TOPICS WHICH HAS ENRAGED MANY FUNDAMENTALISTS and evangelicals who might otherwise have been his allies. But Colony life, as far as my investigations show, is far from being the hot-bed of licentiousness which some critics have suggested.

18. I HAVE RECENTLY RETURNED FROM A JOURNEY WHICH TOOK ME TO EIGHT OF THIS GROUP'S COMMUNES in Northern

Italy and in Paris. The Children of God believe that as we move toward the end-time they will be persecuted by many who pretend to be their friends. Hence it would be naive to think that they were, on such brief acquaintance, willing to show me everything.

19. BUT WHAT THEY DID SHOW ME DID NOT MATCH VERY WELL THE STEREOTYPE WHICH IS PORTRAYED IN NEWSPAPER AND MAGAZINE REPORTS about them. Their members are dedicated and willing to suffer hardships which you and I might not be eager to undergo.

20. OUT OF THE YOUNG DRIFTWOOD AND DROP-OUTS OF AFFLUENT NORTH AMERICA AND WESTERN EUROPE, where before there was only disillusionment, aimless drifting in search of something worth holding onto, and the temporary and ultimately debilitating release of drug-use, the Children of God are beginning to fashion a community of purposeful individuals, living disciplined and --to them--intensely meaningful lives.

21. THEIR MISSION TO WARN THE WORLD OF THE END GIVES THEM A PURPOSE, the communal life gives them a set of like-minded friends, warmth and a sense of belonging which hitherto many lacked.

22. AND AS THEY MARRY AND PRODUCE CHILDREN THEY ARE BEGINNING TO DEVELOP SCHOOLS based on modified Montessori methods and an intense preoccupation with the Bible, which give their children a level of personal attention, caring teachers and absolute moral standards which many young people, not merely the Children of God, feel that they missed in their own upbringing.

23. THERE IS STILL A GREAT DEAL WE DO NOT KNOW ABOUT THEIR WAY OF LIFE and the people who pursue it, but the Children of God deserve a fair hearing. Up to now at least, the judge and jury have tended to be far from impartial.

THE CHILDREN OF GOD

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